

This is an author-accepted version of the following book chapter published by Benjamins:

Matamala, A. (2008) "Teaching voice-over translation: a practical approach". Díaz-Cintas, Jorge (ed.) *The didactics of audiovisual translation*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 115-127.

Teaching voice-over: a practical approach

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1. Introduction

Voice-over is one of the less known modalities of audiovisual translation (AVT), although a new boost has been given to this transfer mode thanks to researchers such as Franco (2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b) and Orero (2004b, forthcoming). Not as popular as dubbing or subtitling, it is used to revoice fictional TV programmes in many Eastern European countries, as well as children films and series in Scandinavia, and it is also used to revoice non-fictional programmes in most countries all over the world. This market should not be neglected and future professionals should be trained in this field, but the reality is that despite the boom of courses on AVT, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, hardly any of them prepare their students for voice-over (Díaz Cintas and Orero, 2003).

A certain number of articles have discussed AVT from a teaching perspective: AVT in general (Díaz Cintas *et al.*, 2006; Kovačič, 1998); subtitling (Brondeel, 1994; Díaz Cintas, 2001b; Gottlieb, 1994 and 1996);

dubbing (Bartrina, 2001; Chaume, 1999; Espasa, 2001); new technologies (Chaume, 2003; Matamala, 2006); AVT in language teaching (Díaz Cintas, 1995 and 1997; Neves, 2004); online training (Amador *et al.*, 2004), and script analysis (Remael, 2004b). However, very few references can be found on the teaching of voice-over, apart from the description of brief activities within general AVT courses (Agost and Chaume, 1996; Bartrina and Espasa, 2003), in which the translation of documentaries is generally considered a first step.

In the following pages I propose to describe the curricular design of a course on voice-over offered by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) within their MA in Audiovisual Translation (MTAV). The article starts with an overview of this successful MA and then focuses on two key issues: the curricular design and the methodology implemented. Finally, a series of sample exercises which are aimed at developing specific skills for voice-over is included.

2. Overview of the MTA V

The current MTA V at the UAB started back in 2001 as a pioneering Postgraduate Diploma in Audiovisual Translation (PTAV) with four practical modules (subtitling, dubbing, voice-over, multimedia), a module on theoretical issues and a series of AVT seminars. Due to the large number

of enquiries from prospective students who could not attend classes regularly, an online version was launched in February 2003 (Bartoll and Orero, this volume). In 2004 the PTAV was developed into a masters degree in AVT, incorporating further modules and developing a parallel online version. Presently, the face-to-face masters degree, which is the one described here, coexists with an online PTAV and an online MTAV, slightly different in their curricular contents.

The experience acquired over all these years has allowed us to progressively adapt the initial structure to satisfy the requirements of the professional market. The 2006/07 structure of the Barcelona-based MA, which has benefited from the suggestions of successive programme conveners and lecturers to whom we are greatly indebted, comprises:

- A compulsory module for all students in which Translation Theory is applied to AVT.
- Five core modules from which students must choose four: dubbing, subtitling, voice-over, multimedia translation and research project.
- Eight optional modules from which they have to choose a minimum of three: intralingual subtitling, audio description, Catalan for AVT, videogames translation, introduction to film studies, AVT foundation, AVT from French and AVT from German.

Translation is done from English into Spanish or Catalan, and students – who usually hold a degree in Translation or Languages – are divided into smaller groups according to their target language (TL). Apart from these modules, students are also offered work placements in dubbing and subtitling studios so that they can put into practice the knowledge acquired during this one-year course.

3. Designing a module on voice-over¹

The suggestions from various lecturers and professional translators have helped us devise a module which embraces this audiovisual translation technique in all its complexity and which offers a hands-on approach.

3.1. What should be taught?

The term ‘voice-over’ has been shrouded in confusion for several reasons, such as the existence of an identical term with a different meaning in Film Studies (Franco, 2001b), the early definitions that related this modality to simultaneous interpreting (Gambier, 1996), the terminological divergences with the industry, and the presence of fuzzy boundaries with other modalities like commentary (Laine, 1996), narration (Pönniö, 1995) or free-commentary (Luyken, 1991). As pointed out by Franco (2001b: 292), voice-

over is labelled in the literature as a category of revoicing, a type of dubbing or even a type of interpreting. All things considered, I believe the definition offered by Díaz Cintas and Orero (2005: 473) is perhaps the best to date:

a technique in which a voice offering a translation in a given target language (TL) is heard simultaneously on top of the source language (SL) voice. As far as the soundtrack of the original program is concerned, the volume is reduced to a low level that can still be heard in the background whilst the translation is being read. It is common practice to allow the viewer to hear the original speech in the foreign language for a few seconds at the onset of the speech and to reduce subsequently the volume of the original so that the translated speech can be inserted. The translation usually finishes several seconds before the foreign language speech does, the sound of the original is raised again to a normal volume and the viewer can hear once more the original speech.

This definition refers to the final result of a voice-over, the product the audience receives, and the aim of our module is to master the different skills that help achieve this effect, in other words, to learn the strategies implemented along the process to attain a final result which conforms to the more or less established characteristics of voice-over.

The fact that there is usually less time to revoice the translation over the original speech requires what Orero (2006) calls “voice-over synchrony”, namely the ability to fit the translated message on top of the original speech, leaving a few seconds at the beginning and at the end. The result is that the target text tends to be more synthetic than the original and students should therefore be trained to condense information using synonyms or alternative structures in which hesitations, fluffs and certain oral features without referential content are omitted (exercise 1).² However, this is not the only parameter translators must take into account since the translation also has to be synchronised with the visual component of the programme, i.e. body movements and images, what Orero (ibid.) calls kinesic and action synchrony. This is why audiovisual excerpts in which body movement is abundant are ideal to practice this feature (exercise 2). Finally, translators must be able to render the translation of an oral product in an adequately reformulated written form, bearing in mind that viewers will receive it as an audiovisual product. Although this might seem easy at first sight, it is one of the main difficulties students encounter when being trained in AVT, because they are generally used to written translations. Reading translations aloud and pretending they are actors recording the voice-over is usually a good method for error analysis (exercise 2).

Although voice-over is used to translate fictional genres in some Eastern European countries (Aleksonyte, 1999; Dries, 1994; Grigaravičiūtė

and Gottlieb, 1999; Kravoska, 2004), the language combinations of our students means that they will use voice-over for non-fictional programmes and the module is therefore centred on the translation of programmes such as documentaries, interviews, current affairs programmes, etc. Professional practice also differs according to the material available for the translation and to the client's requirements. From a practical perspective, Orero (forthcoming) distinguishes between voice-over for production – rough unedited material the translator has to render in the TL – and voice-over for postproduction – the translation of a final product. Within this classification, translators can be summoned to carry out different tasks.

In voice-over for production, translators can be commissioned to carry out the translation of interviews – usually the answers of the interviewee – which are part of a longer programme and edited afterwards by a journalist into a final product (Orero, forthcoming). In this type of voice-over, the translator does not have a transcript of the answers and is usually in charge of the spotting. A variation of this modality is when the translator is asked to adapt a programme – very often sports events – for a specific target audience, adding, changing or omitting information if relevant. The translator creates what could be considered a 'free-commentary' that overcomes the cultural gap between the original audience and the target audience, focusing on the interests of the latter (exercise 3). When working for production, it is also possible to be asked to translate a

programme with a script but without the image, however incredible it might seem given that we are dealing with audiovisual translation. All these types of translation – normally directly commissioned by television networks to freelance translators – require specific skills, similar to those of journalists (Pönniö, 1995: 304).

In voice-over for postproduction, the translator can be asked to carry out the translation alone, or together with steps 2 and 3 below, before sending the translation to the dubbing studio where the programme will be recorded.

1. Translation: translators are normally given a script plus a videotape and they have to render the original product into the TL taking into account all the constraints of this AVT mode but without noting down any timecodes. Very often they work with current affairs programmes or documentaries (Matamala, 2004) in which voice-over is applied to interviews and combined with commentaries – off-screen narrators in the TL that totally replace the original soundtrack – or even subtitles for spontaneous conversations.
2. Spotting: translators can be asked to introduce timecodes indicating the in and out time of all dialogue, so that the recording runs smoothly and the voice artist can easily follow the original.

3. Linguistic control: certain clients impose strict linguistic controls and require that a registered linguist edits the translation, a rather common situation when translating into Catalan; whereas in other cases the translators themselves are asked to account for the linguistic quality of their product.

Nowadays, there is another variable which is gaining momentum: the recording of the voice-over or commentary by translators themselves, especially in programmes or corporate videos that are not going to be broadcast widely, a strategy which surely aims at reducing costs and which demands an even more multifaceted professional.

The previous summary of potential voice-over tasks shows that mastering this AVT mode does not only mean being in control of the technical features but also being able to adapt to various tasks with different products and materials for different clients (Figure 1). This is why in the face-to-face MTAV at the UAB voice-over is not part of a wider module nor a first step in AVT training, but a module in itself.

Figure 1 – Voice-over: tasks, products, materials, and clients

<p><i>Tasks:</i> translation, adaptation, spotting, linguistic control, voicing.</p> <p><i>Products:</i> documentaries (scientific, historical, travel, anthropological, technical, human sciences, etc.), interviews (wide spectrum of topics), sport</p>
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events, making-of documentaries, corporate videos, infomercials, etc. Also TV fictional genres in certain Eastern European countries.

Material: image + script, only image, only script, image in an unknown language and script in English.

Clients: television, dubbing studios (cinema, DVD, television).

The challenges for the voice-over professional – and therefore the skills to be developed by students – are various and in some instances not exclusive of this mode, as shown below:

Comprehension problems: one of the skills that students must generally improve is comprehension, especially when working without a script, since the speed, the accent, the language competence and the diction of speakers vary, as well as the setting and the quality of the recording (exercise 4). Even when a transcription is available, students must learn to identify errors, to pay more attention to the audiovisual component than to the written support text. It could be argued that this is not an exclusive feature of voice-over, and it is unquestionably true, but this is one of the most relevant characteristics of voice-over for production, especially when translating interviews without a transcription, and AV translators must develop skills close to those required of interpreters. The translation of proper nouns is one of the areas of great difficulty and students should be advised to double-

check their spelling when working with a transcription and be taught strategies to identify them when lacking a script (exercise 5).

Content errors in the original: sometimes the original might offer the wrong information (for instance, incorrect data in a historical documentary) and students should acquire the ability to detect ‘suspicious’ information and correct it if necessary.

Terminology and documentation processes: a significant number of translated non-fictional products are documentaries, covering a broad spectrum of topics, generally addressed to a wide audience but which might contain nonetheless a significant number of specialised terms (Matamala, 2004; Espasa, 2004). Students must therefore improve their documentation skills and must be able to undertake terminological searches in any subject in a very short period of time (exercise 6). Again, it might be argued that this is not a specific characteristic of voice-over, but experience tells us that documentaries usually – although not always – require a greater documentation effort than fiction films.

Speakers, register and audiovisual transfer modes: voice-over is used to revoice programmes in which speakers using different registers are found: narrators with a structured discourse displaying a formal language,

interviewees with a more spontaneous language full of repetitions, hesitations, false starts, and syntactic mistakes, and informal conversations with a whole range of registers. The challenge lies in rewording the original to fit in the time available and, while maintaining the same register, creating a text that the voice artist will be able to read easily and the audience will understand without any problems, taking into account that they will only listen to it once. Depending on the client's requirements, voice-over is generally not the only AV transfer mode used to revoice these programmes, and it is usually combined with commentaries for off-screen narrations in which the TL version replaces the source language. Given that synchrony requirements are less strict in commentaries, students learn to translate commentaries at the initial stages of the module, moving later to translate for voice-over before finally combining both techniques towards the end of the course.

The overall aims of our module on voice-over are to make sure that students are familiar with the specific features of this AV transfer mode, that they are able to produce translations adapted to the requirements of the industry, and that they are also able to perform under different working conditions.

The syllabus is designed in order to introduce difficulties progressively during the module. There is an initial session where the theoretical aspects of voice-over and its various types are discussed,

followed up by a two-hour talk by a visiting professional who complements this theoretical background with a more practical approach, adding a professional dimension to the course.

The following six sessions focus on voice-over for postproduction, working always with a script and without annotating time codes. Students start translating commentaries, with less strict synchrony constraints, and move on progressively to deal with more challenging interviews. In these sessions, scientific documentaries are the main programmes translated and analysed, and specific problems are dealt with in carefully selected exercises, including wrong transcriptions (exercise 5), terminological problems (exercise 6) and a wide variety of registers (exercise 7). The last of these six sessions is devoted to the translation of documentaries through a pivot translation, i.e. the translation of a documentary with the audio in an unknown language and the transcription in English.

The next four sessions are taught by a freelance translator and deal with voice-over for postproduction, with students working without a transcription and doing the spotting. At this stage, they are presented with cultural documentaries and making-of programmes that present three main difficulties: comprehension of the original, documentation skills (proper nouns, technical terms, etc.), and synchronisation.

In the last three sessions students are given the most demanding exercises. They simulate working for production and have to translate rough

unedited material and to deliver spotted translations. A final stage is the adaptation of sports events to a specific audience, an intricate activity in which translation and journalistic skills are required (exercise 3). A professional translator working as a freelancer for a television network is in charge of these sessions.

3.2. How should voice-over be taught?

The experience gained during all these years has resulted in a curricular design which covers all aspects related to voice-over not forgetting methodology. This has been especially challenging in our case since most of our lecturers are professional translators, with limited teaching experience, who have made all possible efforts to make the lessons active and fruitful.

After an initial period in which lessons lasted three hours and students worked mainly in class, we have come to the conclusion that two-hour sessions work best to keep students' attention. Apart from the first lecture in which the theoretical foundations of voice-over are laid out, the rest of the sessions are interactive seminars with a maximum of 20 students in which short activities, translated in class, are combined with commentaries on translations previously prepared as homework on a weekly-basis. Following Gile's proposal (1994), lecturers do not only focus on the product but also on the process of translation, asking students

questions regarding the choices made and analysing products before embarking on their translation, in an attempt to diagnose future problems and possible strategies to solve them.

At the beginning of each set of seminars, students are given a CD with selected excerpts as well as a dossier with transcriptions, if available. The CD often includes a Powerpoint presentation in which the lecturer summarises the main points of each session and a document with links to relevant websites. Capturing and converting film clips into an audiovisual format compatible with the software available in the computer lab was a daunting task, especially at the onset of the course (Díaz Cintas and Orero, 2003: 375), but the result is that nowadays students have access to a dossier of written and audiovisual material which allows them to work with authentic programmes, that lecturers themselves have actually translated for dubbing studios in their professional life.

Another stage of the learning process which cannot be neglected is assessment. In our case, students prove that they have attained the learning outcomes set at the beginning of the course by means of (a) class attendance and participation, and (b) completion of three different assignments, marked by different lecturers and corresponding to three stages in their learning process.

4. Sample exercises

In this section, I present some sample exercises, with clearly stated aims and objectives and also the material that should be given to students. When copyright permission to reproduce the audiovisual clips has been secured, the clips are found on the DVD accompanying this book. Otherwise the examples are clearly described, so that readers can easily understand the activity proposed and apply it to materials adapted to their language combinations.

Exercise 1

Outcome: students will be able to implement condensing and reformulating strategies in order to reach voice-over synchrony and deliver a written text which is easy to read.

Activity: students translate for voice-over an excerpt of a documentary with different interviews, individually and outside of the classroom. In class, they exchange their written translations with a fellow student and, adopting the role of a voice artist, they simulate the recording of their colleague's translation.

Material: an excerpt of an interview with many oral features such as repetitions, fluffs, hesitations, false starts, etc., is chosen and given to students in an audiovisual format. The focus is on rewording strategies, so that the interview includes no special vocabulary difficulties. A clip for this exercise, from the documentary *You Don't Know Me*, can be found on: DVD > Matamala > Exercise 1 > YDNM > South Bank.

Remarks: students tend to react enthusiastically to this exercise. They become aware that the voice artist may have problems in revoicing the interview unless the translator has taken into account synchrony constraints and has delivered a translation to be read aloud. This exercise focuses both on the linguistic dimension of voice-over translation and on the specific type of synchronisation implemented.

Exercise 2

Outcome: students will be able to see the importance of adapting the translation to the images on screen when trying to reach synchrony.

Activity: students are asked to translate a short interview in which the interviewee continuously refers to items shown on screen and accompanies his speech with body language.

Material: students are given a digitised clip of the documentary *Crater of Death* plus its transcription. The transcription of the clip, plus a description of key visual information, is included below, so as to illustrate this example:

Peter Schultz: In an oblique impact it may have been much more severe. Why? It's because in the oblique impact [*movement simulating an impact*] you're really excavating and vaporising the upper surface of the earth [*hand gesture simulating vaporisation*], rather than deep into it. Now the upper surface, especially at the Yucatan, was made up of the worst possible mixture of material. I can actually illustrate this. If we had a direct hit, a vertical impact striking for example this plastic block [*he takes a plastic block and points at an impact*], you can see how the energy was literally transferred to the target fracturing it [*circular movement of the finger showing the transfer of energy*], disrupting it. But if you go to a low angle, you get something completely different. If you go to a low angle, and in this case we're impacting about thirty degrees and the impact came in at this direction [*he takes another plastic block and shows another type of impact*], you notice that there [*circular movement of the finger*] is quite a bit of difference. I mean, it's obvious that this was hardly damaged at all [*he shows the last block*]. This one has extensive damage [*he shows the first block*]. So you think, well so what. The crater is smaller. Well, that's not the

point. The real point is that the energy that didn't go into the target here [*he moves the first block*], meant that it must have gone into the atmosphere. Perhaps this is why Chicxulub was so devastating. It was because it was oblique, perhaps the worst possible location, basically the Achilles heel of the terrestrial environment.

Remarks: this example has been chosen because the speaker illustrates an impact by means of two different plastic blocks and makes continuous references to one or the other, either lifting them up or point out at them.

Exercise 3

Outcome: students will be able to create adapted commentaries for a target audience, enhancing their listening comprehension and journalistic skills.

Activity: students are given a ten-minute excerpt of a sports event in which there are participants from their country, yet the original commentator does not focus much on them. Students must create a new commentary adapted to their target audience, making sure they (a) research the terminology of the field, and (b) look for information on the participants from their country. The proposed solutions are analysed in class and compared to those of fellow students.

Material: no video clip has been included due to copyright restrictions and no transcription is available because in this particular activity students should work without it. However, any ten-minute recording from a sports event could be used.

Remarks: this activity is generally considered very challenging by students and is usually proposed at the final stages of the course. An even more complicated version proposes a free-commentary of sports events not widely spread in the target culture, such as American football in Europe.

Exercise 4

Outcome: students will improve their listening comprehension skills by confronting a wide variety of accents and speeds in a battery of exercises carefully selected.

Activity: students are given various short video clips and are asked to translate them, identifying the difficulties presented by each speaker and the strategies they could put into practice to overcome them.

Material: ten short one-minute video clips of interviews of people with different native and non-native accents, types of voice (female and male, young and old), and talking at various speeds. There are three video clips for this exercise.

Video 4.1: features the first minute of the documentary *Roaring Lion* and has been chosen because of the accents of the speakers. The clip can be found on: DVD > Matamala > Exercise 4 > Roaring Lion > Rastafari.

Video 4.2: is particularly interesting due to the accents and the speed at which some of the people speak. The clip, from the documentary *Bang! Bang! in da Manor*, can be found on: DVD > Matamala > Exercise 4 > Bang Bang in da Manor > Jobs.

Video 4.3: this excerpt, from the documentary *Hasta siempre*, is included to illustrate English non-native accents and, although the inclusion of Spanish open subtitles makes it easier for Spanish translators, this exercise is aimed at students translating into other languages, with no knowledge of Spanish. The clip can be found on: DVD > Matamala > Exercise 4 > Hasta siempre > Changes.

Remarks: students often lack the ability to understand specific accents and they are taught strategies to improve this skill, as well as techniques to

deduce the meaning and offer a finished translation in those cases in which even a native speaker would not possibly understand the original.

Exercise 5

Outcome: students will be aware that even when working with a written script they should pay attention to potential wrong transcriptions.

Activity: students are asked to translate eight short excerpts for voice-over or commentary in class. They should work in pairs and in a relatively short period of time, and should not be alerted to the possible inaccuracies in the script. Each pair of students begins with a different clip so that, even if they do not have time to finish all the translations, at least each excerpt will be translated by a couple of groups and they will be able to share their impressions with the rest. After a set period of time, the lecturer starts a discussion in which they all reflect about the process of translation.

Material: short video clips plus transcription. Two examples of erroneous transcriptions can be found on: DVD > Matamala > Exercise 5.

Remarks: this session is especially rewarding because it shows students the importance of the audiovisual component, rather than the written one.

Nonetheless, the lecturer should reassure students that not all transcriptions are as inaccurate as those selected and that practice will teach them to identify these mistakes.

Exercise 6

Outcome: students will be able to carry out *ad hoc* terminological searches and translate commentaries from scientific documentaries.

Activity: students are given homework to translate a ten-minute excerpt from a wildlife documentary and write down the process followed in order to find the terminological equivalents of any zoological or botanical terms. The results are discussed in class focusing on both the terminological searches and the commentary writing.

Material: a ten-minute excerpt from a wildlife documentary plus its transcription is given to students. I generally use the first ten minutes of the documentary *Reef Encounter*, from the series *Wildlife on One*, which features a wide array of very specialised terms. The inclusion of the term ‘stone-mover wrasse’ is especially interesting because it often leads to confusion. Students do not identify it as a distinct subspecies but consider ‘stone-mover’ as a descriptive adjective of what the wrasse is actually

doing. The full transcription of the ten-minute excerpt can be found on:
DVD > Matamala > Exercise 6.

Remarks: I personally like working on episodes which focus on animals displaying a wide variety of subspecies (for example, insects or coral reef fish) and which include terms whose scientific name or equivalent are not found on the internet, forcing students to go to libraries, zoos and museums and ask specialists. Indeed, one of the common problems with new students is that they rely solely on the answers provided by the internet, and especially Google. The books, reference works and electronic resources used can be discussed at the end of the session and an additional list of references can be provided by the lecturer.

Exercise 7

Outcome: students will learn to maintain the register of the original, specifically in excerpts with some vulgar features.

Activity: students are given an interview to translate as homework. The class activity consists of analysing the translations in groups of four and debating the different registers used in the TL. Students present their translations and the rest of the class discusses them.

Material: the transcription and the video clip of an interview in which the interviewee is angry and uses coarse language. I normally use an interview of Cathy Konrad, a movie producer who talks about *Scream*, and the Weinsteins brothers' reaction to the initial scene of the movie in which a ghostly mask appears. The transcription of Konrad's words can be found on: DVD > Matamala > Exercise 7.

Remarks: it is especially interesting to work with this type of text after students have worked on scientific documentaries that depict technical and formal language since it makes them aware that voice-over translation is not only formal and planned but can also present numerous registers which have to be reproduced in the TL version.

5. Concluding remarks

I hope that this article helps demonstrate that voice-over is an AVT mode with its own particularities and with such constraints that it deserves specific training. Although students trained in dubbing and subtitling might find it easier to start translating for voice-over, because they have probably been made aware of the specificities of audiovisual translation, of the mistakes that can be found in scripts and of the research processes that the translator

must often carry out, I am of the opinion that they would benefit from training in the specific skills of voice-over.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Cortés, Sierra, Martínez and especially Orero – who launched the course in 2001 – in the design of the contents of the module on voice-over.
2. Please note that all exercises are printed after the main text.